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Female St. Sebastian: Parallel lines in the radical lesbian art of Gina Pane and Catherine Opie

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Summary : This paper is a comparative analysis of works by two contemporary artists: Gina Pane, an Italian, and Catherine Opie, an American. Both use performance and autobiography and raise the subject of lesbian identity. Moreover, both share themes of suffering, pain and relationships between women. They were active in various cultural contexts, however. Pane worked in Western Europe during the moral revolution of the 1960s and '70s. Opie has been active in American art from the beginning of the '90s and she has been participating in political changes from the AIDS crisis and the radical queer movement to the present day assimilation of the LGBTQ community. The tradition and symbolism associated with St. Sebastian serves as the historical background the for the analysis in this paper, as both artists used the iconography of this male homoerotic idol in their subversive depictions of femininity and sexual dissimilarity. The works of the two artists are subjected to a comparative interpretation considering various contexts, similarities and differences, and evaluated in terms of contemporary artistic and political challenges of queer culture.



Fig. 1: Catherine Opie, "Julie (play piercing)." *Girlfriends.* New York: Barbara Gladstone Gallery, 2010.

Catherine Opie

The American photographer Catherine Opie is a star in the

contemporary art scene. In 2008, the Guggenheim Museum in New York organized a retrospective of her art titled *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* . She is also present as an artist in the sphere of popular culture: the portraits she made in the lesbian, transgender, and S/M communities in the early 1990s were featured in such TV series as *Six Feet Under* and *The L-Word* . Like these ground-breaking HBO and Showtime cable channel productions, Opie's photographs have been crucial for the shaping of contemporary visuality, queer identities, and lesbian identity in particular. Opie's own identity has been central to her art and to her perspective on the American society.

Opie became a successful artist by using beautiful photographic images to document various American queer communities at the turn of the 20th and 21st century. Looking for the specificity of American differences, as well as for a sense of unity, she portrayed surfers, high-school football players, lesbian families and couples living across the US, but also American highways, shopping malls, and houses. It was in recognition of Opie's pursuit of the essence of Americanness that the Guggenheim Museum bestowed on her the status of a contemporary "American photographer," which she shares with such renowned artists as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans.

Her early portraits of transgendered people collected in two series, *Being and Having* (1991) and *Portraits* (1993-97), are particularly memorable. They often served as illustrations for articles on the work of Judith Butler and gender performance at a time when queer theory first became influential across the world. Her portrayals of women performing a wide range of lesbian feminine and masculine identities, particularly those characterized by gender indeterminacy, built up her reputation both in the world of contemporary art and in gender and queer theory.

But the most dramatic works in the history of American modern art, next to Robert Mapplethorpe's *Portfolio X* (1978) are still Opie's three self-portraits made while she participated in the lesbian S/M subculture in Los Angeles. Those three subversive and shocking masterpieces are titled *Self-Portrait: Cutting* (1993), *Self-Portrait: Pervert* (1994), and *Self-Portrait: Nursing* (2004). The two former works are self-portraits representing a lonely S/M ritual in which the artist simultaneously performs the role of the sadist and of the masochist. All three are stylized to resemble Renaissance self-portraits, with decorative drapery as the backdrop for the centrally seated author confronting the viewer with her "painful" body.

To this day I find it difficult to look at *Self-Portrait: Pervert* . Opie is

seated in the center, in a regal pose, against a backdrop of patterned fabric. Instead of a crown she wears a close-fitting black leather mask that reaches down to her neck. Her large breasts are bare. Above them the word "pervert" has been cut into the bleeding flesh. Her arms, however, present the most painful sight, perforated as they are with dozens of needles. Emanating from the image is excruciating pain, a ritual pose, and proud self-display. The bloody wounds seem to pierce the surface of the photograph.



Fig. 2: Catherine Opie , *Self-Portrait: Pervert* (1994).

This type of pain takes me back in time, to 1970s France, and to another artist who, though largely forgotten today, is a cult figure in the hermetic circles of radical performance art. Gina Pane (1939-1990) died around the time Catherine Opie began making her transgressive portraits and self-portraits. I would like to discuss Pane's art in relation to her reception by contemporary lesbian artists. Opie's 1990s photos, though firmly rooted in the American tradition of photographic portraits and the LA lesbian culture, seem to retroactively transform Pane's classic performances. The relation between the two lesbian artists who belong to very different generations has led me first to consider the durability of the motif of suffering in queer art, and second, to take a look at contemporary art as a lesbian and gay history archive.

Whereas sexual identity constitutes the main subject of Opie's photography, in Gina Pane's case the sexual significance of her performances has to be extracted from other meanings attributed to performance art in that period. The cultural and political revolt of the 1960s and '70s has been an important context for reading Pane. May 1968 in Paris is an important historical reference, while 1970s European body art is an artistic reference. By contrast, the contexts for reading Opie's art are American queer theory, lesbian

sadomasochism and transgenderism of the 1990s and the AIDS epidemic.

Some artists allow us to arrive at the deep sense of the lives and works of their predecessors. So far, critics have only mentioned Pane's sexual identity in passing, choosing instead to concentrate on the broad categories of femininity, religion, or the politics of body art. Consequently, Pane's art remains closed and, as it becomes encrusted with legend, it is also increasingly difficult to understand. In her bloody self-portraits, Opie pays tribute to her forerunner and reveals layers of previously unrecognized yet still relevant meaning. Homosexual identity, which emerged in the 1960s as one of the great modern subjects of cultural and social discourse, to this day constitutes a wound on the body of civilization. Whose body is it most of the time?

Gina Pane

All we have left are the photographs. We can only imagine the pain.

Close-cropped hair, plaid shirt, pants. A barefoot woman is climbing strange metal bars that look like a piece of gym equipment. Since the photos are usually reproduced in black and white, they may not appeal to present-day viewers accustomed to strong visual effects. Yet the shots are dynamic: the woman appears in several positions on various levels of the bars, climbing up and down more than once.

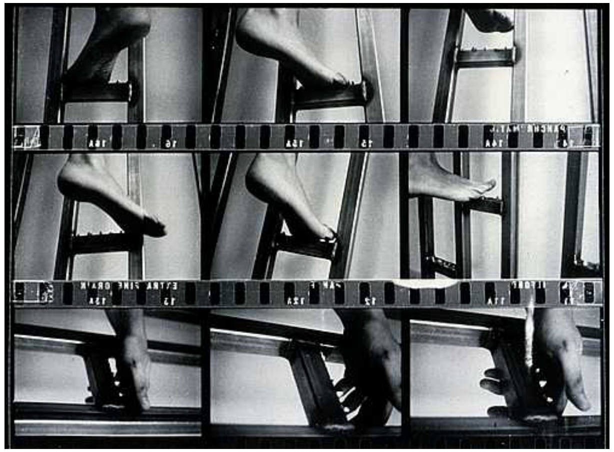


Fig. 3: Gina Pane, *Escalade non Anesthesiee* (1971).

When we look closely, we see that the rungs of this metal structure have sharp, jagged edges and the climber's feet and hands are bare. Only the photographs remain; the sense has to be deciphered. Climbing without anesthesia - *Escalade non Anesthesiee* (1971) - a classic work of 1970s performance art.

Gina Pane. Many pronounce her name Gina Pain, turning the Italian world for bread, "pane," into the English word "pain." Pane, the queen of European body art, is experiencing a renaissance in the 21st century, an age of virtual bodies. Her actions conceived forty years ago were a constant manifestation of suffering. Called by ironists "the mad woman with the razor blade," she repeatedly made incisions on the skin of her hands, arms, back, belly, lips, tongue, and eyelids. She used her own blood and wounds as a text, writing a "Letter to a Stranger" - her artistic manifesto. This 1974 "Letter" states: "If I open my body so that you might see my blood, it is because I love you." Her pain did not go to waste; subsequent generations continue to explore the meaning of her performance, climbing without anesthesia, time and time again.

But what if we attempt to look at Pane's art the way it was perceived and used by her successors? We can reenter the wound through later representations. Looking at Opie's 1993 self-portrait, it is difficult not to think of Pane. She interprets Pane for us in a direct and disturbing way, going beyond the critical interpretations published to date. Pane's and Opie's wounds are shallow yet deep enough to draw picturesque lines of blood. The incisions Pane made during her performances were tiny.

As befits the 1990s, Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) is a large color photograph, quite unlike the Pane's ascetic performances and their photo-documentation. Opie sits with her back to the viewers, against a backdrop of decorative fabric. Like Pane, she wears her hair short. On the American artist's massive back a "childish" drawing has been cut: house, cloud, sun, and next to them two stick-figure women holding hands. The entire image consists of flowing red lines - the artist's blood flowing from razor-blade wounds. The wound cut into the body is a home for the love of two women.



Fig. 4: Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993).



Fig. 5: Gina Pane, *Le Lait Chaud* (1972).

Let us now move back in time. Opie's back. Pane's back. Nakedness. Whiteness. Paris 1972, *Le Lait Chaud.* Dressed in a white shirt, Pane sits with her back to the audience. She slices her back with a razor blade. The blood sinks into the fabric. The red stains stand out against the white, like a drawing. Aestheticism. At another point of the performance, Pane faces the audience and lays the razor against her cheek. Blood comes to the surface. The participants, always silent during Pane's performances, as if hypnotized, are suddenly aroused from their paralysis and scream, "No, not the face!" There follows an explosion of emotions and sense.

On November 9, 1973, at the Galleria Diagramma in Milan, Gina Pane is performing *Azione Sentimentale* . We enter the space of three rooms. On the floor of the first room there is a black velvet square with a white satin rose appliqued in the middle. On the walls there are three photographs showing roses in a silver vase. "Dedicated do a woman by a woman" reads Pane's caption. In the next room a slide is being projected on a wall. It shows a portrait of the artist from the waist down, dressed in white pants, holding a bouquet of red roses in her lap. In the third room a performance is in progress. Rings have been drawn in white chalk on the floor, and inside them the word "donna" (Italian for "woman"). Only women have been invited to witness this performance. Pane, dressed in white, performed before an all-female audience seated in rings.



Fig. 6: Gina Pane, *Azione Sentimentale,* Galleria Diagramma, Milan (1973).

Pane lay on the floor holding a bouquet of red roses, which she alternately pushed away and held close. This was a series of carefully staged and repeated poses, which ended with Pane sitting curled up like an embryo, hugging the bouquet. In the next phase, Pane pierced her forearm with eight rose thorns and sliced her palm with a razor blade. The outstretched bleeding hand symbolized love passing from hand to hand. The artist offered this blood to the community of women present. Significantly, she surrounded herself with women and used the rose to say "I love you." Two female voices could be heard while Pane proceeded to cut her body; an Italian and a French woman reading letters addressed to each other; an epistolary dialogue of love, as well as a narrative about the death the mother of one of the women, whose lover had sent her a bouquet of roses as consolation. Then, Pane repeated all the initial gestures and movements with a bouquet of white roses. The performance closed with the sound of Frank Sinatra singing "Strangers in the Night" in the adjacent room.



Fig. 7: Gina Pane, *Azione Sentimentale* (1973)

Azione Sentimentale is characteristic of Pane's performances, which were long, usually lasting an hour or two, and carefully staged in an almost ritualistic manner. The repetition of certain meaningful gestures and movements, as well as the demonstration of objects

played a central role in them. Pane's actions tended to combine multiple media: slides, texts read aloud, music, as well as the filming of the audience. Simultaneously, each performance was documented on film and photographs; Pane herself carefully planned the documentation, making drawings, so that the photographer she worked with knew exactly when to turn on the camera; Pane was the director. Although the cutting, wounding, and pain appeared only at specific points of the performance, it was on them that the photo-documentation was centered, for Pane's language was based on the wound and on pain, not on the body, which she rarely exposed. The pain and the wound awakened both herself and her audience from paralysis. Pane programmatically worked within and against an anesthetized society.

Based on the photo-documentation and film footage, Pane and her partner Anne Marchand created artistic representations which she called "evidence." These were usually geometric compositions of photographs showing the key moments of the performances: the body in religious poses, blood, wounds, the artist's self-mutilation and its demonstration. The "evidence" of *Azione Sentimentale* is especially beautiful. The artist's ritual poses, the whiteness of her clothes, the bouquets, the cuts, the thorns puncturing the arm, all in shades of white and red. White and red like white and red roses, body and blood, and finally, blood and milk, which often turned up in the performances. Milk in the artist's mouth is mixed with the blood of cut lips or tongue, as in the performance titled *Autoportraits* (1973).

The photographic compositions - artistic evidence of Gina Pane's performances, double up as self-portraits inscribed with subtle biographical traces. The evidence of *Azione Sentimentale* shows her in several frames, each time reduced to a fragment. We never see the full figure, only framed parts of the body and clothing. The artist curls up. Her face is invisible. The face disappears from many of the photographs which are designed to show fragmentation, to locate the wound or gesture. It seems that the artist's individuality is muted in the name of the sacrifice she makes of her suffering.

Because of this, critics find it so easy to universalize the radical gestures, interpreting them as paradigms of religious ritual, rebellion against the alienation of the individual, or opposition to the anesthetized society. Yet Pane is a performer of the 1970s, when the private was political, and when the creators of body art followed a code of ethical and social responsibility. The painful poetry of Pane's performances is filled with deep and concrete meanings. It was no accident that she rejected traditional art and began to perform after the May 1968 political and intellectual revolt in Paris. The social context and Pane's biography are subtly intertwined. She was born in France, lived in Paris, yet spent her youth in Italy. Her

father was Italian, her mother Austrian. Italian and French cultures permeate her art, in which she makes use of both languages. This explains the dialogue of love conducted by the two women, one Italian, the other French.

European and American masochistic body art of the 1970s is usually discussed within the historical frame of the Vietnam War and western artists' identification with the victims of western imperialist military and political violence. Although all this is present in Pane's art, femininity is an additional element. Countless analyses of her art and internet entries on the artist herself restate the claim that Gina Pane externalized the self-hate that women living in a patriarchal culture are forced to internalize, or that she reenacted the violence against women present in this culture. Though her feminism is obvious, from a present-day perspective such a generalized feminism may cause meaning to be diluted and to disappear in the universal. Therefore Catherine Opie's contemporary lesbian self-portrait restores Gina Pane to us in her unique singularity.

Pane's art was not only about Vietnam. Critical commentaries on body art also emphasized that the risky and radical practices of 1960s and 1970s artists were suffused with the revolutionary spirit of various civil rights movements that shook western civilization and transformed it entirely. Risk-taking, exposing oneself to suffering, and confronting the aggression of the dominant system was the experience of those who fought in the name of women's rights, the rights of people of color and lesbians. Democratic civil rights were extended to those groups because someone took the risk of confronting injustice and discrimination. The story of minority movements in the history of humanity's development and humanization is also a story about the continuing sacrifice of human victims. A wound must appear on the social body for an awakening and a healing to take place. It was in this context that Pane spoke about making an intervention into an anesthetized society and climbed without anesthesia.

Azione Sentimentale was a confession of love between women. Homosexual rights and love stories were no less audible in the 1974 *Action Melancolique* performed in Naples. Initially three couples sat on the stage: two women, two men, and a woman with a man, each couple holding a bouquet. Commenting on this performance, Pane wrote that by putting homosexual couples next to the heterosexual one she had pushed aside pathological associations and created a shared emotional space. Then Pane herself came on stage and drew hearts on her palm and shoulder, and then on the naked back of a woman holding a bouquet.

One might ask: Did Catherine Opie in her *Self-Portrait/Cutting*

invoke that moment, paying tribute to her predecessor? The presence of Pane's partner Anne Marchant at the performance had been significant. It was through the photographs that Pane introduced the personal into her performances. Blood and wounds also appeared in *Action Melancolique,* during which Pane cut her ear and pierced her arm with drawing pins. The homosexual emotional space had to simultaneously become the space of pain. Transformation was symbolized by the artist rinsing her mouth with cold milk, which she warmed in her mouth and spat out, feeding with warmth the cold and unfeeling world.

Likewise, Opie's *Self-Portrait/Cutting* was a masterpiece on the subject of violence, on the suffering that is the price of a relationship between two women in a hostile homophobic environment. This contemporary reading associated with homophobic aggression cut into Opie's back seems to bring out the private and social aspects of sexual identity in Pane's performances. Manifested in her work, suffering reflects not just the ever-present risk involved in the struggle for minority rights but also her private struggle and resistance. Pane often used the word "aggression." Asked about the central role of the wound in her works, she answered that the wound stands for a state of the body's extreme sensitivity; it is a sign of suffering, a sign of external aggression. The wound recalls the situation of being the object of aggression, of always being exposed to violence. The performances, which left the artist in a state of extreme psychological and physical exhaustion, were intended to break through the viewers' indifference or hostility, to expose their fear and disgust, to lead them to empathize with her pain. Pane internalized and exposed on her body the aggression towards homosexuals that exists in the outside world. Her performances render the state of the individual locked in a hostile structure, imprisoned in it as in a trap and subjected to torture. This explains the presence of the terrible prop - the bars - in many of her works. When she "climbed without anesthesia," the prop was a sharp metal ladder. In the first phase of *Autoportraits* (1973), for half an hour Pane lay on a metal frame with lighted candles underneath.

Pane came to believe in art as a political force that could serve as a catalyst of change. She may also have treated the spectacle of suffering as a means for transforming consciousness through sensitizing it to the pain of others. Sexual identity appeared in her work on the biographical level, when she made art together with her partner Anne Marchand and used her photographs in the performances; on the thematic level, when she introduced homosexual couples into the performances; and on the intellectual level, by declaring an affinity with other artists of the sexual avant-garde in her times.

Strategies of resistance

In Gina Pane's notes made in 1968 we read: "Cunningham and Cage were the initiators of new relations; they led to their explosion." This is a reference to both artistic and existential relations. The avant-garde composer John Cage and the dancer Merce Cunningham worked and lived together, transforming the conventions of music and choreography to produce works that became crucial for the history of performance art. Cage's famous composition *4′33″* (1955) is 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence, during which the pianist on the stage only made three movements with his hands over the keyboard without touching the keys. In Jonathan Katz's interpretation, silence for Cage was a metaphoric refusal to participate in the oppressive American culture dominated by McCarthy, who persecuted communists and homosexuals with equal fervor. Silence was a form of resistance and a refusal to participate in a repressive ideology, but also a form of self-concealment in that dark period. It also served as a commentary on the erasure of sexual difference in the 1950s.

Pane performed two decades later, at a moment in western culture when sexual minorities had come out of hiding and taken on the struggle to win civil rights. Therefore Pane substituted the struggle with pain for silence. Her self-aggression constituted a way of externalizing, of freeing oneself from the ages of violence and signified risk associated with gestures of resistance. Opie, in turn, in her transgendered and sadomasochistic lesbian portraits, documents another phase of suffering - as well as a pride in difference - the queer phase.

In Pane's art, the body and sexuality were not just political but, above all, intimate and psychological. Therefore critics emphasize the connections between Pane's art and French psychoanalytic feminism of the 1970s, associated with the bisexual Helene Cixous and the lesbian Luce Irigaray. Both these anti-patriarchal philosophers stressed the freeing of the feminine *jouissance,* meaning pleasure/pain, through lesbian desire which restores the denied union with the mother's body. Just like blood and milk in Pane's work, maternal and feminine metaphors were crucial for the invention of a new feminine language of art.

In her performances we find numerous references to the maternal body in the context of love between women, either direct, as in *Azione Sentimentale,* or oblique, made by way of erotic allusions. In the course of the performance titled *Psyche* (1974), Pane unbuttoned her shirt to lick and suck her own breast, and then made incisions around her navel.



Fig. 8: Catherine Opie, *Self-portrait: Nursing* (2004).

Catherine Opie, too, makes use of maternal imagery in her provocatively perverse manner. *Self-Portrait: Nursing* (2004) is her version of the Lesbian Madonna. Against ornate red drapery, the artist sits enthroned, exposing her ample body. Above her breasts the word "pervert" is still etched in scar tissue. In accordance with the title, she is nursing the naked child held in her arms, though she retains her transgendered "butch lesbian" looks. It is from this perspective that she emanates maternal symbolism as she nurses the child.

In Pane's art, the wound and blood connected with sexuality contributed to the masochistic element that is characteristic of many practitioners of body art. Masochism is no less forcefully present in Opie's openly lesbian early art. In Pane's work, the suffering additionally contains religious references associated with the Catholic iconography of martyrs. All the wounds are like stigmata. Religious martyrdom is a form of voluntary submission to violence in the name of faith, and as proof of faith. Sexual identity accounts for Pane's masochism and, to a certain extent, also Opie's.

St. Sebastian

Like many gay masochist performers, from Michel Journiac to Franko B and Ron Athey, Pane makes a sacrifice of herself on the altar of the homophobic civilization. These artists chose the language of the suffering body, dressing it up in the costume of Christian ritual. Imitating Christ, they reached for the symbols of the perverse religion that persecuted and wounded them, but that simultaneously placed at the center of its imaginary the rejected and humiliated victim with his beautiful tortured body. The figure of St. Sebastian stands at the center of the tradition of homosexual art, not

only on account of the exposition of the naked masculine body but, more importantly, because the body has suffered unjustly. Gina Pane and Catherine Opie can be read as female St. Sebastians. They appropriate and reinterpret the gay icon of western culture. Thinking about the arms pierced with needles in Opie's self-portrait and the drawing pins in Pane's body, let us move on the arrows that wound but do not kill St. Sebastian.

St. Sebastian is Christianity's greatest homoerotic icon. How is it that a Christian martyr was able to take on this role, suspended between the sacred and the heretical? The responsibility lies with Italian art, whose practitioners took pleasure in portraying his attractive, naked, passive, and ecstatic body tied to a tree and penetrated by the arrows of other men. The basic elements of this homosexual pictorial myth are: youth, beauty, and nakedness combined with the physical strength of a soldier, as well as suffering and ecstasy. The arrows constitute an erotic and phallic symbol, while the entire drama takes place in the closed military world of men. In addition to this sadomasochistic scenario there is Sebastian's status of a lonely and unjustly persecuted man. Furthermore, as the saint responsible for plague victims, St. Sebastian acquired a special "gay" significance during the AIDS epidemic. Thus in the 20th century he became the patron saint of homosexuals.

However, the original story was somewhat different. As we learn from St. Ambrose, St. Sebastian's hagiographer, the martyr lived in the 3rd century AD. He was a middle-aged bearded Roman officer of emperor Diocletian's guard. He died a martyr's death in 287, at a time when Christians were being persecuted, because he had accepted the teachings of Christ and was converting others. The emperor had his archers tie his one-time favorite soldier and their companion to a post and pierce him with arrows. But St. Sebastian did not die. When a woman named Irene wanted to bury him, she found a spark of life in his body and healed him. St. Sebastian than returned to the emperor and accused him of barbarity towards Christians, whereupon he was sentenced once more, but this time his body was stoned and thrown into a sewer.

Medieval mosaics still showed St. Sebastian as a mature bearded man in full clothing, without arrows. But since the Renaissance he has become the Christian Adonis, usually shown as a naked youth bound with ropes and pierced by arrows, with an ecstatic facial expression and hips barely covered by drapery. His body tied to a tree is outstretched and exposed. In Christian iconography, he constituted one of the main excuses for artists to do detailed studies of the passive and sensuous male body.

In fin-de-siecle art, Sebastian became one of the decadent idols of

perversion, symbolizing non-normative sexuality. His status of a gay icon was sealed in modern culture. As such, he was the subject of writings by Oscar Wilde, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Jean Cocteau, Thomas Mann, Jean Genet, Marcel Proust, Garcia Lorca, Tennessee Williams, and Susan Sontag. In 1976, Derek Jarman made the cult film *St. Sebastian* . In the photographic art of Yukio Mishima, Pierre et Gilles, and Wolfgang Tillmans, the martyr braces his body in an erotic trance of pain, even more obvious that in the baroque paintings of Guido Reni, the baroque master of the saint's thanatic ecstasy. Today, homosexual women are appropriating St. Sebastian's body.

The role of the contemporary American St. Sebastian is played by Ron Athey - the masochistic performance artist who literally becomes St. Sebastian in his painful performances. In 2000, Catherine Opie produced the famous series of photographic portraits *Ron Athey.* She presents the performer's body tortured with incisions, piercings, and tattoos, fainting, and laid in religious poses. These are monumental portraits, monumentalizing suffering and showing the muscular yet martyred male body. Athey's performances, which have acquired a cult status, are rituals of pain related, on the one hand, to the artist's HIV-positive status and, on the other, to the perversion of American religious fundamentalism. Athey was raised in the radical protestant Pentecostal church, whose psychophysical extremism inspires his art. This art is clearly political in that it refers to intolerance and sexual discrimination, violence and obsession harbored by American society. Opie's collaboration with Athey indicates that this subject is also important for the woman artist who created her early radical self-portraits to provoke but also to oppose the stigmatization of gender and sexual difference.

Pane-Opie

In 1981, after ten years of exhausting performances, Gina Pane abandoned this art form. Until her death of cancer in 1991, she focused on making poetic compositions combining sculpture and photography which she called *Partitions* . They are suffused with the iconography of three martyrs: St. Francis, St. Lawrence, and St. Sebastian. Traces of their martyrdom were already present in the suffering she imposed on herself during the performances - the piercing, cutting, and singeing. Thus Pane supplemented the wealth of feminine symbolism with masculinity, embracing both genders in her self-sacrificing embodiments and efforts to awaken the anesthetized society.

Opie's self-portraits are open to as many contexts in late 20th-century American culture as were Pane's performances in

European culture of the 1960s and '70s. Probably Opie assigns a greater importance to participating in protests against American cultural conservatism, art censorship, homophobia, and the stigmatization of non-heteronormative identities and sexual subcultures. The suffering caused by the AIDS epidemic constitutes another important context. Finally, Opie is concerned with such issues as lesbian subjectivity, departures from the normative models of femininity, as well as transgressing the gender binary with the attendant stereotypes. The self-portraits share with Opie's other works a characteristic documentary quality. Opie belonged to a lesbian subculture in which S/M was a ritual, a sexual practice, and a search for an alternate image of lesbian sexuality beyond a delicate floral femininity. The writings of Pat Califia provided the theoretical underpinnings of this lifestyle.

Opie has come a long way in artistic terms from being a "pervert" on the margins of society and visuality to being a presence in *The L-Word* and making a portrait of its star, Katherine Moenning (Shane) with a dog in her lap. This is one of the images featured in the excellent new portrait series *Girlfriends* (2008). All the famous American women portrayed in this series have a "butch dyke" look and constitute objects of desire for the artist. The most famous lesbian photo series by Opie, which appeared right after her radical S/M and transgender portraits is called *Domestic* (1995-98) The title itself suggests a change. Rather than focus on individuals isolated by their difference, these images show couples and threesomes, lesbian relationships and families at home in many states across the US. This is a journey through a happy lesbian middle-class America.



Fig. 9: Catherine Opie, "Catherine, Melanie & Sadie Rain," from the *Domestic* series (1995-1998).

Opie explains that by photographing women's homes and families she pursued her own dream of happiness and love. In line with the

best documentary art tradition, she also registered the way the society and the model of the family is changing and becoming increasingly diverse. These unusually private yet anthropological portraits of women and girls in love represent a world in which the archetype of St. Sebastian may fall into oblivion - for both women and men. This is a dream that Gina Pane could not have visualized in her performances which were fully subordinated to the idea of martyrdom. Thankfully, while martyrdom also influenced an early stage of Catherine Opie's artistic career, she has lived to see a society in which "queer" has become "normal." Hers is the friendly America of Ellen Degeneres.

Only Ron Athey would probably have disagreed and continued to diagnose the patriarchal, military, and religious perversions of gender and sexuality in contemporary western society. The times of St. Sebastian are not over yet. Sebastian is timeless, as is sadomasochism in sex, human relations, and politics - unless *Domestic* is a prophetic work that announces the gradual unfolding of a new feminine world.



Fig. 10: Gina Pane, Self-portrait.

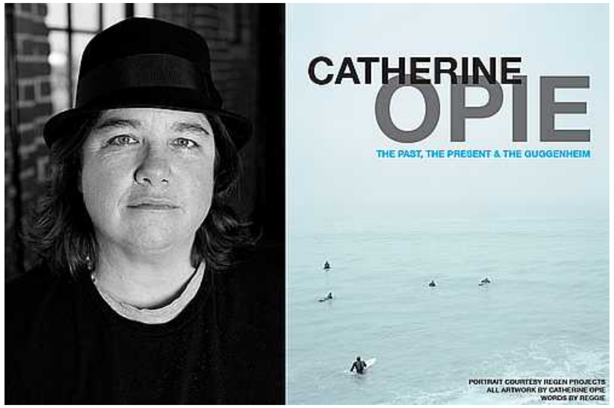


Fig. 11: Guggenheim Museum poster for Catherine Opie's show, New York (2008).

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